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Arvind Sharma and Katherine K. Young, eds., Fundamentalism and Women in World Religions

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Arvind Sharma and Katherine K. Young, eds, *Fundamentalism and Women in World Religions* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2007), pp. xxvii + 195, £47.50, ISBN 0-567-02533-0 (hbk).

Though appearing in a general ‘survey of the field’ format, the collection of pieces gathered together as *Fundamentalism and Women in World Religions* actually manages to situate itself quite relevantly within the larger context of religious studies. By exploring the often overlooked connections between imperialism, secularization, fundamentalism, orthodoxy and feminism, the authors provide a glimpse into an intricate web of relations, not only among the major religious traditions (with which this volume deals almost exclusively), but between gender, and perhaps more importantly, between fundamentalist and feminist women within those same traditions. The rise of fundamentalism as a response to a loss of power in the face of global, secularizing trends has created a space where identities are being formed as counter-reactions, and which have substantial consequences for women’s rights throughout the world. Utilizing a balanced tactic of political analysis, portrayed as a double movement ‘from right to left’ and ‘from left to right’, the chapters seek to increase awareness for the multiple, nuanced and different ways in which women are related to men, as well as to each other, and the expectations which they are perceived to fulfill within these varied cultures. These sketches are depicted as essential, then, for moving beyond the stereotypes that a more general or cursory reading of the situation might advance.

The differing versions of feminism on display in these writings all contrast subtly enough to provoke an enriching discussion on the precarious relationship between fundamentalist women and their feminist counterparts. Indeed, such a dialogue seems necessary if we are to more fully elucidate the fundamentalist response (described at times in the terms of evolutionary psychology as a ‘fighting back’ under political stressors) to the role of women in modernity as a whole. As a reactionary measure, then, fundamentalism begins to reveal itself, through these contributions at least, as a selective appropriator of modern advancement, a hierarchical social structure granting a stable sense of identity during crises and a clever combination of tradition and modernity, all in an attempt to support a complementary—equal though different—notion of gender relations. This is also to state, though perhaps somewhat paradoxically, that women not only appear to function as symbolic of a particular religion’s encounters with modernity, but that they often thrive in fundamentalist contexts, achieving status and leadership roles in their communities that tend to reflect, at times, feminist political goals.

The articles which comprise this brief collection include Eva Hellman on situating a woman’s place in Hindu/Hindutva cultural-political practice, Tessa Bartholomeusz on the strange interlinking of fundamentalist and feminist representation in Buddhist Sri Lanka, Vivian-Lee Nyitray on the resurgence

of older, fundamentalist forms of Confucianism in East Asia, Sylvia Barack Fishman on the unique particularities of Jewish fundamentalist female identities, Heidi Epstein on the subtle ambiguities and overlap of Christian fundamentalist/feminist women and Reem A. Meshal on the appropriation of an alternative feminist stance in Canadian Muslim women's wearing of the *hijab*.

As an introduction to the complex religious trends concerning women and fundamentalist belief patterns, which we now face and which will only continue to increase in their complexity over time, I recommend this collection of nuanced chapters as a movement along a necessary path of discussion. Indeed, I hope that similar efforts, ones that serve also to broaden our understanding of issues that are often over generalized, may join this one over time.

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